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Thoreau's Argument in "Economy"

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THOREAU'S ARGUMENT IN "ECONOMY"

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In the second paragraph of Walden,[1] Thoreau explains that he is going to give a sincere and an honest account of his life in Nature to satisfy the curiosity of his friends who have expressed a desire to know the details of his two-year adventure at Walden Pond. In the third paragraph, he says that he is also going to write something about the bad condition of his neighbors in and around Concord. These first two statements of purpose are important not only because they indicate what the book is going to be about, but also because they represent the dominant organizational pattern that Thoreau uses throughout the book to press his argument that Nature's way of living is good and civilization's way of living is bad. Throughout the book, Thoreau continually contrasts Nature in its numerous forms, including his own life as a natural human being, against the unnatural and wretched condition of the civilized world in its many forms. In "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," he divides the subject matter between his search for a natural environment in which to live and the lack of reality that characterizes civilization and makes it an unsuitable place to live. In "Sounds," he writes about the inspirational sounds and sights of Nature which

[1] The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. II (Boston and New York, 1906); all subsequent references in the text are to this edition, indicated by page number.

he could perceive from his house at Walden Pond and the sordid things of the civilized world that he could see and hear from this same place. "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors" has much to say about the civilization that once lived near the road that goes by Walden Pond, but whose ruins are presently giving way to the prolific return of the original and natural inhabitants. Thoreau organizes most of his chapters in this fashion, continually juxtaposing the evils and weaknesses of civilization with the goodness, strength and beauty of Nature (but not always in the same order that he first mentions them in his opening remarks of "Economy").

"Baker Farm" provides the best example of this organizational pattern and its effect as a literary technique. He begins the chapter describing his own odyssey through the natural world. Like some demi-god of ancient mythology, he frolicked through the element, visiting the trees (which he describes as <u>temples</u>, <u>pagodas</u> and <u>shrines</u>) to obtain what spiritual inspiration they could render (223-224), then proceeding on to some new and enlightening experience in Nature:

> Once it chanced that I stood in the very abutment of a rainbow's arch, which filled the lower stratum of the atmosphere, tinging the grass and leaves

> around, and dazzling me as if I looked through colored crystal. It was a lake of rainbow light, in which, for a short while, I lived like a dolphin. If it had lasted longer it might have tinged my employments and life. As I walked on the railroad causeway, I used to woner at the halo of light around my shadow, and would fancy myself one of the elect. (224)

This absolute freedom from care that he enjoyed as a natural being to pursue the urging of his "Genius" inspired the exaltation of his soul and provided a measure of delight and ecstacy of incomparable magnitude.

Immediately following this charming description of his life in Nature, he brings the reader back to the mainstream of human affairs. In what he thought to be a deserted shack, he found a family of Irish immigrants who had come to America in search of a different kind of rainbow than the one he had just found. His description of their condition seems exceedingly morbid:

> An honest, hard-working, but shiftless man plainly was John Field; and his wife, she too was brave to cook so many successive dinners in the recesses of that lofty stove; with round greasy face and bare breast, still thinking to improve her condition one day; with the never absent mop in one hand, and yet no effects of it visible anywhere. . . . Meanwhile my host told me his story, how hard he worked "bogging" for a neighboring farmer, turning up the meadow with a spade or bog hoe at the rate of ten dollars an acre and the use of the land with manure for one year, and his little broad-faced son worked cheerfully at his father's side the while, not knowing how poor a bargain the latter had made. (226-227)

Thoreau goes on to say that he tried to help them by explaining his own better condition, how he achieved it and how they might do the same; still they preferred the old country quagmire of thinking and living to any of Thoreau's best advice. Finally he returned to the romance of the natural world where the troubles that plague the John Fields of this world do not exist. The description of John Field and his family would be depressing by itself. The picture that Thoreau paints of his own natural life would be attractive to the reader by itself. But Thoreau juxtaposes his life in Nature with John Field's life in civilization to achieve a contrast which makes the depressing seem even more depressing and the delightful seem even more delightful. This kind of organizational pattern exists in most of the chapters and creates a certain force designed to change the reader's mind about the popular way of thinking and living.

Thoreau's continuing efforts to affect the mind with an almost constant current of tension should convince the reader that Walden is something more than the personal account of a man lived alone in the wilderness as a kind of attempt to purge away the evils with which civilization had scarred his soul. From my point

of view, the reader would understand the book better if he realized from the beginning that the details of Thoreau's life in Nature, the account of Nature in its many other various forms, and the negative commentary on civilization are important only insofar as they contribute to the presentation of a definite philosophical argument. This argument is Thoreau's ultimate purpose in Walden.

The best place to see this argument take shape is in the beginning. From this viewpoint, then, "Economy" is the most important chapter in the book. "Economy" serves as an introduction, and like all good introductions it presents the whole argument in general, the problem and its solution. The problem is the damned condition of civilized man and the solution has to do with the individual freeing himself from this condition and becoming a spiritual being. Thus everything Thoreau says about society in "Economy" represents the problem and the contrasting details of his own experience and observations involving Nature stand for the solution. Keeping this in mind, we can see the design of Thoreau's argument; we can see that the chapter is an organized philosophical argument and not merely the criticism of an eccentric hermit who wants to justify his anti-social behavior.

My purpose in this thesis, then, is to explain the argument as Thoreau presents it in "Economy," with special attention on the first twenty pages of the chapter. In addition, I will give some attention to his method of presentation and go into some detail concerning the nature of Thoreau's solution to the problem.

I

To present an argument effectively, the author must pay strict attention to the logical organization of relevant material that will support his point of view. The usual method is to show that the status quo is a problem, that it should and can be changed and then to follow up with a feasible solution. Thoreau does organize his argument in "Economy" according to this outline; but few readers ever recognize it as such. Indeed, his organization seems sporadic primarily because he does not give his audience adequate directions to follow the logical progression of his argument. He may be describing the wretched condition of a certain type of individual in one paragraph and then abruptly change the subject to some aspect of Nature in the next paragraph without providing a transitional statement to explain the shift in emphasis. For the most part,

he does not relate one statement to the next with words such as for example, because, therefore, in conclusion, etc. This lack of benevolence causes the reader a great deal of frustration and may be due to Thoreau's personality which is characterized by a seeming attitude of indifference towards the welfare of his fellow man. On the other hand, it may be part of his artistry which allows for numerous interpretations of the work.

Despite this apparent lack of consideration for the reader's complete understanding, Thoreau does present the whole argument in a logical sequence in the first twenty pages of "Economy." In the second paragraph, he presents the argument in its most general form:

> I would fain say something, not so much concerning the Chinese and Sandwich Islanders as you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England; something about your condition, especially your outward condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well as not. (4)

If the reader fails to realize that most if not all of "Economy" relates to this statement, he will be overwhelmed with confusion before he reaches the end. This is the abstract statement of the argument, the chapter (even the whole book if you want to stretch it that far). Thoreau's

negative comments about the lives, traditions and institutions of civilized man, the accounts of his own life at Walden Pond (including the detailed figures involving expenses), and everything he has to say about Nature in its various forms and relationships to man, all of this is concerned with (1) the condition of his neighbors (which becomes the condition of civilized man in general before the chapter ends), (2) "whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is," and (3) "whether it cannot be improved as well as not." To translate these three considerations into the terms of an argument, we need recognize the bad condition of civilized man as the problem that exists in the status quo and needs to be changed because of its evil consequences, the matter of necessity as that part of the argument which shows evidence that the problem is not an inherent and unchangable part of life, and improvement as the solution that will relieve the evil consequences of the problem.

In the same paragraph that contains the abstract, as if to impress upon the reader the gravity of the problem and the need for immediate action, Thoreau begins right away to describe the condition of his neighbors:

> I have travelled a good deal in Concord, and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. (4)

By comparison, the penance they seem to be doing is hardly less incredible and astonishing than that of the Hindoo worshippers who have been known to sacrifice themselves to their god by roasting their flesh over fires, starving to death while chained to a tree, crawling across whole empires on their stomachs or standing on the tops of buildings on one leg for long periods of time (4-5). In Thoreau's mind, his neighbors seem to be living under the power of some demanding and tyrannical providence that requires their endless labor to atone for their sins. Even the labors that Eurystheus demanded of Hercules for his freedom in Greek mythology "were trifling in comparison with those which /his/ neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end" (5). Unlike Hercules, the laboring people of Concord cannot appease their god no matter what they do or how long they do it; His work has no end, meaning that it is eternal in addition to being without purpose, providing no real compensation of any kind for the workers. This is really another abstract statement; but it is specific enough to suggest the religious nature of the problem that exists in the civilized world.

Thoreau's remarks thusfar indicate that he is not making the modern Christian statement on the fallen condition of man. To describe the hard work of his neighbors as penance without end or purpose is to profane the very protestant ethic upon which this nation was founded and built. Nevertheless, Thoreau continues his negative commentary on private enterprise, which amounts to heresy from either a religious or secular point of view. His first specific example that illustrates the problem of his neighbors' wretched condition is the farmer. In Thoreau's opinion, the farmer suffers under a heavy misfortune, having inherited such things as land, cattle, barns and tools with which he must work his time away. His life of blood, sweat and tears amounts to little more than digging his own grave. He is a serf of the soil. The evil consequences of this kind of drudgery is that his "poor immortal soul" is "well-nigh crushed and smothered, pushing before it a barn . . . and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot!" (5). This kind of honest and hard life, making things grow and living off the fat of the land, which has always been elevated above all other occupations for building character and soul, in Thoreau's estimation, crushes and smothers the "immortal soul." Furthermore,

he argues that even "the portionless who struggle with no such unnecessary encumbrances find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh" (5-6), suggesting that a person needs his time and energy to cultivate his physical self rather than the soil if he wishes to preserve his immortal soul.

Thoreau next turns his attention to the businessman and craftsman for a second example of his neighbors' bad condition:

> It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live . . . always on the limits, trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt, a very ancient slough . . . always promising to pay, promising to pay, tomorrow, and dying today, insolvent; seeking to curry favor . . . lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility, or dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity, that you may persuade your neighbor to let you make his shoes, or his hat, or his coat, or his carriage, or import his groceries . . . (7)

The kind of work that the businessman engages in is of a different nature than the farmer's; nonetheless, it occupies his time and attention and ultimately causes his moral degradation. In a constant struggle to remain solvent

and stay out of the poor-house, he must prostrate his integrity before his creditors and customers, promising one thing and doing another to make his income meet his expenses. Thus, in the field of human relations, he is a very artificial person, always feigning generosity and friendship so that he might sell himself or his wares, not being able to afford sincere and honest relationships with other people because of his shaky existence. Thoreau describes the businessman's outward condition as bad or worse than the farmer's; thus there is little doubt that he considers the condition of the businessman's soul to be as bad or worse than the farmer's.

Next in Thoreau's catalogue of depraved citizens is the Teamster who like the others is a slave-driver of himself having no higher purpose in life than the care of his shipping interests and horses. Concerning the condition of his soul, Thoreau asks:

> How godlike, how immortal, is he? See how he cowers and sneaks, how vaguely all the day he fears, not being immortal nor divine, but the slave and prisoner of his own opinion of himself, a fame won by his own deeds. . . . Think, also, of the ladies of the land weaving toilet cushions against the last day, not to betray too green an interest in their fates! As if you could kill time without injuring eternity. (8)

Whether they are farmers, merchants, teamsters, ladies weaving toilet cushions, or whatever, Thoreau's interest in the outward condition of his neighbors always signals an interest in their inward condition because he believes that the condition of the body is a positive indication of the soul's condition; "the body is the symbol of the soul."[2] Thus, if a person encumbers his body with heavy labor, his soul is likewise weighed down and smothered. If he debases the personal integrity of his character with the sordid doings of his body, his soul also exists in a debased condition. If he wastes his time doing trifling things with his physical self, he also wastes the eternal life of his soul.

In general, the condition that Thoreau finds his neighbors in helps him to illustrate the problem which exists throughout the civilized world. Man occupies himself so much with the sordid and transient affairs of this world that he forgets about eternity and thus exists in a damned condition both physically and spiritually. The time and energy that should be spent in "cultivating" his higher nature, he spends cultivating fields, persuading his neighbors to buy his wares, watering his horses, weaving toilet cushions, or any number of other meaningless and trivial matters. The object of his labor is luxury and

[2]The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. VIII (Boston & New York, 1906), page 202.

luxury by itself exerts a corrupting influence over those who possess it:

> Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. . . . Of a life of luxury the fruit is luxury, whether in agriculture, or commerce, or literature, or art. . . . But why do men degenerate ever? What makes families run out? What is the nature of the luxury which enervates and destroys nations? (15-16)

Luxury is evil because it hinders the elevation of the soul and body just as excessive toil smothers the body and soul. Thoreau considers luxury to be excessive heat with which people surround themselves thus keeping their bodies unnaturally hot. By cooking their bodies, they in turn cook their souls (15). The problem that Thoreau describes, then, is really dual in nature: excessive labor and luxury add up to double damnation for the bodies and souls of civilized people everywhere who work their lives away in the pursuit of hotter and more incessant fires.

Thoreau has much more to say about the problem of man's damned condition in civilization in the following pages. But page sixteen is the logical end of his initial presentation of the problem part of the argument as it is

illustrated by the condition of his neighbors and their specific ways of living. If I proceed further with the problem as he describes it in its numerous other forms, I will not be able to reveal the design of the whole argument which, after all, is one of the reasons for this paper. At this point, then, I shall begin to explain the second part of Thoreau's philosophical argument, that part wherein he considers whether or not the condition of his neighbors is a necessary or inherent part of their natural lives.

Although he recognizes the probability that the mass of civilized men will remain damned for ages to come, he still argues throughout the chapter (and the book) that the individual need not "knock under and go with the stream" (108). Where he first begins to point this out in "Economy" is difficult to determine. His satirical description of his neighbors' condition by itself suggests that damnation is not the immutable decree of a tyrannical providence. If it were man's fate to be damned, irony or criticism in any other form would be completely out of taste. The purpose of irony is to reform and if this were impossible then irony would be meaningless and exceedingly cruel. But Thoreau makes us chuckle with his description of his neighbors' fantastic feats of penance, so that we know

that he does not believe their condition is an inevitable tragedy. Moreover, his rhetorical questions, "Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt?" and "Who made them serfs of the soil?" and "Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?" indicate that the farmer is doing more than is actually necessary in Thoreau's opinion.

He gets into the second part of the argument concerning necessity more explicitly in the two paragraphs between the descriptions of the farmer and the businessman:

> But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before. (6)

> Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. . . . The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly. (6-7)

In these statements, Thoreau is absolutely clear in his expression that there is a right way and a wrong way to live; and it is through our ignorance that we mistakenly persist in living the wrong way, laying up treasures that have no lasting value. In addition, he definitely says that the higher qualities of man's nature can be preserved; and even though most people do not bother to preserve them, even though they continue living "mean and sneaking lives" which ruins any chance of preserving them, the possibility of preserving them and thus improving his condition remains. Likening the finer qualities of man's nature to "the bloom on fruits," he is vaguely touching on the solution part of the argument, which I will explain later in the course of this paper. In these two paragraphs, though, Thoreau actually includes something of all three elements of the argument: (1) most men exist in a damned condition because they waste their time working to obtain luxury (evil problem); (2) they are damned not by necessity but by ignorance; (3) they could actually cultivate their higher qualities which would develop into something of a lasting value (solution). This inclusion of something of each part of the whole argument in a relatively small space is characteristic of Thoreau's method of presentation. The reason is not to

frustrate the reader (as it often does) but to keep his mind on the whole argument while Thoreau is concentrating the emphasis but on a single part. At this point in the chapter, the emphasis is still on the bad condition of his neighbors, while the emphasis on necessity is developing and soon comes to dominate the text for some length; and the matter of improvement or the solution is just becoming discernible.

The second part of the argument assumes more of the focus following the paragraph on the teamster where Thoreau boldly proclaims that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (8). Thoreau is proceeding under the assumption that the mass of men are secretly aware of their own wretched condition but keep living their sordid lives because they believe God has ordained it. "They honestly think there is no choice left." (9) But Thoreau is convinced that the mind of civilized man is contaminated with false thinking which causes him to do what he does and despair because of the evil consequences for his body and soul. The reason for the second part of Thoreau's argument, then, is to convince the individual that the damned condition of civilized man is not his fate and thus he has no real reason to despair unless, of course, he has passed the point of no return.

Thoreau has already suggested this with his satirical comments showing how absurd his neighbors appear to the sane observer. Moreover, he has already asserted that ignorance causes them to exist in a damned condition. But when he gets to the heart of the matter of necessity, he concentrates the argument for awhile on the cause of the ignorance. He launches an all-out assault on the credibility of antiquity which has instructed the present generations of man with its way of thinking that is not truth at all but mere "prejudice" and "smoke of opinion, which some have trusted for a cloud that would sprinkle rain on their fields" (9).

> Age is not better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have not very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures . . . I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose. (9-10)

Living according to the dictates of its own thought, antiquity lost contact with spiritual reality. Its philosophy

has no concept of absolute value which has been proven by its absolute failures in the past. According to Thoreau's argument, then, to be of any practical value a philosophy must be based on successful experience. Age has had no success living according to the dictates of its philosophy; therefore that philosophy is absolutely false and of no value as instruction for the present generations. Thus, the life of doing fantastic labors for meaningless luxury, which Thoreau considers to be a condition of damnation, is as false and unnecessary as the false philosophy that conceived it. By discrediting age and its philosophy, Thoreau is trying to assure the individual that he will not offend God should he discard the old way of life and adopt a new one.

So many defects exist in the old way of thinking that Thoreau has a wealth of material to support his assertion that the philosophy of age is false. Following the statement that age has never given him a shred of valuable advice, he provides an example of a falsehood that men for ages have esteemed as an absolute truth:

> One farmer says to me, "You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with;" and so he religiously devotes a part of his day to supply his system with the raw material of bones; walking all the while he talks behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerks him and his lumbering plow along in spite of every obstacle. (10)

This convincing illustration showing that man does not need meat in his diet to give him strength helps Thoreau discredit antiquity as an ultimate authority. Heretofore, man has always believed that meat is an absolute necessity of life and has always spent a considerable part of his life obtaining it for his diet. But Thoreau shows this axiom to be entirely absurd by very cleverly pointing out that vegetable food alone generates the oxen's tremendous strength, implying that the same could be true for man. The plan is to cast a shadow of doubt over the whole of antiquity by exposing one of its laws as a falsehood. In the course of the chapter, he will deal with many of the other erroneous old concepts which govern the lives of civilized men; but for the moment, he satisfies himself with merely shaking the wall by removing one of its vital parts.

After undermining the credibility of civilization's authority in this fashion, Thoreau continues in a slightly different manner to convince the individual that damnation is not his fate unless he remains ignorant. He does admit that the "incessant anxiety and strain of some is a well-nigh incurable form of disease" (12), meaning that the destiny of some people is in fact damnation because of an addiction to luxury which they cannot cure themselves of, their prejudices being so strong in their minds that

they cannot tolerate a different mode of living or kind of thinking from that passed down from Adam Smith and Ben Franklin. But Thoreau intends to show that this disease that many suffer with is not an inherent part of the individual's life by simply explaining what really constitutes fate or necessity. By necessity he does not mean what is necessary to maintain a moderate business or small farming enterprise for the sake of a comfortable and socially acceptable existence. Rather, he dwells on the necessities of existence exclusively:

> By the words, necessary of life, I mean whatever, of all that man obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any ever attempt to do without it. (13)

The necessities of life vary from climate to climate; but in New England they include "Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel" (13). Food is the one necessity that no living organism can do without because it generates the vital heat that keeps life in the body. For Thoreau, vital heat is the nearest thing to life itself (14). The other three are necessary in colder climates: fuel serves to make food more palatable in addition to warming the Shelter, which along with Clothing helps "to retain the heat thus generated and absorbed. The grand necessity, then, for

our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us" (14). From his own experience, which he gives a detailed account of later in the chapter, Thoreau knows for a fact that a person can obtain everything necessary to generate and maintain life in his body at a trifling cost in time and effort. Thus, he knows and tries to convince the reader that the disease prevailing in civilization, the perpetual strain and anxiety of its people, the wretched condition of their bodies and souls, is not an inherent evil that the individual must tolerate. Thoreau is adamant in his argument that the daily penances that men do for no purpose is not God's immutable will, but a condition caused by their false way of thinking and their ignorance of the available alternative.

Thoreau's discussion of heat as the grand necessity ends his initial consideration of whether or not man's bad condition is necessary. This part of the argument does not begin as a full blown statement that trails off after a few pertinent examples like the consideration of the problem of man's bad condition does. Rather, it begins small and grows larger. It starts through suggestion which originates in Thoreau's satirical treatment of the kind of work that civilized men do. From this, it becomes

more apparent through implication: when he says that man is damned because of his ignorance, he implies that if man were enlightened he would not necessarily have to be damned; he also states outright that man can preserve his higher qualities which further implies that his depraved condition is unnecessary. The matter of necessity becomes the center of the argument when Thoreau argues that the individual need not despair as the mass of men are doing because the popular philosophy of life which causes the problem is not absolute truth but mere prejudice and smoke of opinion. Then he concludes his argument that man's degraded condition is unnecessary by explaining what really constitutes necessity insofar as the body's life is concerned. This part of the argument is really transitional material between the two major parts of problem and solution. It is necessarily involved with both of these other parts: the bad condition of his neighbors brings on the argument that it is unnecessary, which in turn requires Thoreau to provide an alternative condition which is an improvement over the present one. In other words, the argument of necessity grows out of the assertion that a problem exists and into the idea

that a solution exists. It shows that civilized man's bad condition is unnecessary by working towards and into absolute necessity which is the condition of Nature and the condition that the individual can and should be in according to Thoreau.

Thus, Thoreau believes that Nature is the solution to the problem of civilized man's damned condition. I do not say this simply because so many biographers and critics have said it, but because the argument in "Economy" and elsewhere in the book makes it clear that the matter of improvement that he mentions in the initial abstract does involve Nature. When Thoreau is dealing with the possibilities of human improvement, what terms does he use? In other words, what does he compare the spiritually improving man to? better means of transportation? better architecture? improvements in medical technology? higher standards of living, better and more elaborate houses, food, clothing, fuel? better programs of social welfare to help others obtain luxury? improved methods of agriculture? These questions are facetious because the answer to all of them is an unqualified "no." According to Thoreau, these improvements are all parts of the disease and pain from which civilization is suffering. "They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was al-

ready but too easy to arrive at;" (58) meaning that the improvements of civilization are better ways to reach a damned condition. In Thoreau's opionion, they serve no purpose other than to defray the cost of a man's funeral expenses. (34) They restrict the elevation of his soul and lead to its damnation.

When Thoreau is writing about the possibilities of man's improvement, he usually does so in terms of natural facts, not always but usually. He first describes man's higher nature like "the bloom on fruits" which "can be preserved only by the most delicate handling" (7). In other words, Thoreau feels that the spiritual side of man's self is subject to decay if proper measures are not taken to preserve it. Preserving fruit at its peak of ripeness means keeping it away from the influences that tend to make it rotten like excessive heat. Likewise, man can preserve the higher qualities of his body and soul only if he does not expose them to the corrupting influences of hard labor and luxury which Thoreau describes as providing the body with more heat than is necessary to preserve its life. This comparison between the natural phenomenon of ripe fruit and man's higher qualities is the

first mention of improvement in "Economy" outside of the original abstract statement and gives the reader some general concept of Thoreau's solution to the problem.

Thoreau's main comment on improvement, however, comes after his discussion on the minimum necessities of life:

> When a man is warmed by the several modes which I have described, what does he want next? Surely not more warmth of the same kind, as more and richer food, larger and more splendid houses, finer and more abundant clothing, more numerous, incessant and hotter fires, and the like. When he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced. The soil, it appears, is suited to the seed, for it has sent its radicle downward, and it may now send its shoot upward also with confidence. Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?—for the nobler plants are valued for the fruit they bear at last in the air and light, far from the ground, and are not treated like the humbler esculents, which . . . are cultivated only till they have perfected their root, and often cut down at top for this purpose, so that most would not know them in their flowering season. (16-17)

Here again Thoreau uses a natural fact to describe the alternative way of life which is an improvement over the damned condition of civilized man. He sees a "perfect

analogy between the life of the human being and that of the vegetable, both of which are characterized by "growth" and "fructification."[3] Both the seed and man maintain life from the nourishment they get from the soil, the seed with its roots and man with the physical parts of his body. Unlike the civilized man, however, the seed is not content to make the getting of food its chief end in life. Its natural purpose is to grow upwards into the light and air (which are symbolic of the spiritual world as the soil is symbolic of the physical world in this metaphor). The fruit that it ultimately produces is a visible symbol of its inward spiritual maturity in the physical world. According to Thoreau, the human being has this same inherent potential within his body. He need not remain a mere seed rooted in the earth getting more food for himself than is necessary. He can grow into a higher form of being in this world and fulfill his natural spiritual destiny like the vegetable that produces fruit and flowers. In other words, Thoreau compares the depraved man of civilization with a seed that has developed roots only and damaged its growth with too much heat, and the

[3] The Writings of Thoreau, Vol. VIII, 201-205. This journal entry contains a complete explanation of his idea concerning the analogy between human and vegetable life.

natural man who has ascended into a higher form of being with a seed that has developed a stem, leaves, and fruit in addition to its root system. The fruit of the seed not only corresponds to human reproduction but also to a man's virtuous, moral, and even godlike conduct of his life in this world, which is "a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (16), the outward signs of his inner spiritual growth. A body that practices these virtues as naturally as the plant bears its fruit is in harmony with Nature, inwardly rich in the essence of spirit, and prepared for the life to come. In the argument, Thoreau's solution to the problem of damnation is to be a natural growing being as opposed to an unnatural, undeveloping, civilized being. At this point, we can begin to see that the general problem and solution pattern of Thoreau's argument in "Economy" is the same pattern that he uses in the other chapters, which for the most part involves a balanced contrast between negative civilization and positive Nature. In this light, then, we might consider them as more detailed forms of the same argument in "Economy."

Following the analogy between vegetable and human life, Thoreau reaffirms his intention to provide a measure of hope for the masses who are discontented with their

damned condition in life. Then in what seems to be a digression, he suddenly turns the focus on his own way of living in the past (which he promises to do in the very first paragraph of the chapter):

> In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick to; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line. (18)

Notice that Thoreau is still writing about improvement here, not necessarily the improvement of mankind but how he has always worked for the improvement of himself. This is not a digression from the argument as it seems. He is not retreating from his argument back to "the fortress of absolute individualism" as Krutch suggests.[4] He is really advancing the argument effectively by narrowing the focus to his own experiences as an example of improvement just as he concentrates on describing the bad condition of his neighbors as being examples of the problem. Indeed, individualism is not a fortress for retreat, but his idea of what characterizes a natural being. Therefore, individualism is a term to describe the kind of life that represents the solution to the problem that faces every individual who wants to control the destiny of his soul.

[4]Joseph Wood Krutch, Henry David Thoreau (Toronto, 1948), page 111; hereafter cited as Krutch.

Concerning the matter of his personal improvement, then, Thoreau describes the way in which he spent much of his time before the Walden experiment trying to come to grips with Nature:

> To anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature herself! . . . It is true, I never assisted the sun materially in his rising, but doubt not, it was of the last importance only to be present at it.
>
> So many autumn, ay, and winter days, spent outside the town, trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express! . . . At other times watching from the observatory of some cliff or tree, to telegraph any new arrival; or waiting at evening on the hill-tops for the sky to fall, that I might catch something, though I never caught much, and that, manna-wise would dissolve again.
>
> For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snow-storms and rain-storms, and did my duty faithfully; surveyor, if not of highways, then of forest paths and all across-lot routes, keeping them open . . . (19)
>
> In short, I went on thus for a long time (I may say it without boasting), faithfully minding my business . . . (20)

When he finally discovered that his business of self-improvement and his neighbors' businesses of material improvement had little in common, he decided to ignore them completely and mind his

own business exclusively. Of course the setting for this business was at Walden Pond in the midst of the natural world and a safe distance from the corrupting influences of civilization. He conducted this business with "the Celestial Empire," trading his time and effort for spiritual wealth from Nature, the chief retailer of this valuable commodity.

At this point in the chapter, Thoreau has suddenly become exceedingly liberal in using the language of economics to describe the solution to the problem. He assumes the character of a shrewd and uncompromising businessman, referring to his experience in Nature at Walden Pond as though it were a universal business enterprise for his personal profit and capital gains. He seems to be Ben Franklin himself in his autobiography giving the reader some practical advice about obtaining wealth through individual enterprise:

> I have always endeavored to acquire strict business habits; they are indispensable to every man. If your trade is with the Celestial Empire, then some small counting house, in some Salem harbor, will be fixture enough. You will export such articles as the country affords, purely native products, much ice and pine timber and little granite, always in native bottoms. These will be good ventures. To oversee all the details yourself in person; to be at

> once pilot and captain, and owner and underwriter; to buy and sell and keep the accounts; to read every letter received and write or read every letter sent; to superintend the discharge of imports night and day; to be upon many parts of the coast almost at the same time . . . to keep yourself informed of the state of the markets, prospects of war and peace everywhere, and anticipate the tendencies of trade and civilization . . . in fine account of stock to be taken from time to time to know how you stand. It is a labor to task the faculties of a man,--such problems of profit and loss, of interest, of tare and tret, and gauging of all kinds in it, as demand a universal knowledge. (21-23)

He also says that Walden Pond was a good place for such a business "not solely on account of the railroad and the ice trade; it offers advantages which it may not be good policy to divulge; it is a good post and a good foundation" (23). Moreover, he describes the necessities of life (Food, Clothing, Shelter, and Fuel) as the necessary "capital" or "means" for going into the business of trade with the Celestial Empire (23). One would naturally wonder why Thoreau would impersonate the character of an extreme rugged individualist to describe his spiritual improvement when the sordid language of the business world would seem to degrade the subject of spiritual growth.

But, then, Thoreau is presenting his argument to a nation of people whose minds are primarily occupied with economic enterprises in the physical world and understand Nature solely as a means to material progress. Thoreau knows that his audience cannot understand his metaphysical concept of spiritual growth in natural terminology alone. Thus he aids their understanding by using the type of language which he knows they are going to be able to comprehend. To convince a nation of ignorant people, he must speak to them on their own level; so he uses their language in his spiritual context. Also, by using this kind of language and assuming this kind of character, he can create a certain amount of tension; turning everything around, he shows how he in a state of material poverty is getting rich doing a good business with the Celestial Empire; while everyone else with their hard labor and luxury is going bankrupt doing a good business with the Terrestrial Empire. The irony resulting from this kind of paradox clearly indicates his exalted spiritual condition in relationship to their debased spiritual condition without having to go into a tedious lecture. He has not reached the summit yet, but compared to his neighbors he is a multi-billionaire and they are less than paupers. Moreover,

this is the key to understanding the relationship between the chapter's title and the substance of the text. "Economy" refers to the profit and loss economics of human spiritual growth and Thoreau's story is the account of a person who has done a relatively prosperous business with the spiritual world; while civilization is an example of the masses of men who exist in spiritual poverty and are doomed to spend eternity in the devil's poorhouse unless they start doing a serious business with the Celestial Empire. This is the same argument that he usually presents in natural terms; only the form is different.

To recapitulate briefly, Thoreau's argument is that the multitudes of civilization exist in a damned condition because of their ignorance; but insofar as the individual is concerned, this condition is unnecessary and can be improved. In the first twenty pages or so of "Economy," he presents the whole argument more or less in its general form, proceeding in a logical sequence from problem to solution. Yet while he concentrates on one part of the argument at a time, he seldom lets the reader lose sight of the other parts. In other words, though he may focus on the problem in the beginning, necessity in the middle,

and improvement at the end, he seldom dwells on one part without including statements of implication or suggestion which pertain to the other two parts. Apparently, he wants the reader to keep in mind the whole of the argument at all times. Moreover, Thoreau establishes the story of his life as a natural being, or one might call it the account of his spiritual business, as a major part of the argument itself. The account of his own success helps illustrate a feasible solution to the problem. Also we can see that the general problem-solution pattern of the argument in "Economy" is essentially the same kind of contrasting pattern that he uses in the other chapters; which is to say that Thoreau repeats the argument in many different forms but uses the same pattern of contrast between negative civilization and positive Nature.

The following is a general outline of Thoreau's argument as he presents it in the first part of "Economy."

> Thoreau's statement of purpose is that he wants to write something about his life at Walden Pond, but first he will explain (1) the bad condition of his neighbors, (2) how unnecessary it is, and (3) improvement of this condition.
>
> I. Condition or Problem: People everywhere around Concord work for nothing except the damnation of their bodies and souls.
>
> A. Farmer crushes and smothers his body and soul doing heavy labor.
> B. Businessman ruins his moral integrity with his sordid doings.
> C. Teamster and ladies of the nation kill time and waste eternity.

D. The object of their labors (luxury) is a corrupting influence by itself.

II. Thoreau argues that this problem is not an inherent part of human life.

A. He attacks the popular philosphy of antiquity to show it is not truth.
B. He explains the real truth about the necessities of life.

III. Thoreau maintains that the solution is natural spiritual growth.

A. Man has the same potential for this growth as the elements of Nature.
B. He relates some of his past-experiences in Nature which had for their purpose his own self-improvement.
C. He gives some general advice on the business of self-improvement.
D. He introduces his Walden Experiment as a business of self-improvement.

II

The reamainder of "Economy" consists of numerous repetitions of this same argument in its various particular forms. He still uses the same basic pattern of contrasting civilization against Nature, and then bringing himself into the argument in various places as a human representative of Nature. For the most part, the argument deals with the necessities of life because Thoreau feels that they are the basic means to either spiritual wealth or spiritual poverty.

Similar to the beginning of the chapter itself, Thoreau starts by telling the reader that it would be of some value for him to understand where and how he (Thoreau)

obtained the necessities of life for his business of self-improvement at Walden Pond (23); but first he digresses to consider the condition of civilized man in relation to the necessities of life. From Thoreau's point of view, civilized man exercises no common sense at all when it comes to the necessities of life. He is more influenced by "the love of novelty and a regard for the opinions of men, in procuring it, than by a true utility" (23). Civilized man considers them as a means to enhance his image in the mind of society and gives little consideration to the fact that they serve one real purpose only, to generate and retain the body's vital heat. This kind of false thinking causes him to live an unnatural life indulging in fantastic labors to obtain more than what is necessary and natural in order that he might be fashionable and acceptable to others. Of course this constant crushing and cooking of the body for the sake of appearances restrains the elevation of the soul. In addition to this evil, Thoreau believes that the abundance of necessities that creates fashion in the civilized world is a form of fraud that civilization has made into a tradition to cover up reality, which has evil consequences of its own. Concerning fashion in the form of clothing

Thoreau argues that "we know but few men, a great many coats and breeches" (24). The same is true with regard to Shelter and Food. For Thoreau, this lack of truth in civilization is reason enough to move to Walden Pond where reality prevails as he later explains in "Where I Lived and What I Lived For."

Throughout the chapter, Thoreau seems always to be echoing his original sentiments about hard labor and luxury:

> Even in our democratic New England towns the accidental possession of wealth, and its manifestation in dress and equipage alone, obtain for the possessor almost universal respect. But they who yield such respect, numerous as they are, are so far heathen, and need to have a missionary sent to them. Besides, clothes introduced sewing, a kind of work which you may call endless; a woman's dress, at least, is never done. (25)

Luxury in whatever form corrupts those who work for it and those who possess it. In this case, socially impressive clothing is the mark of an irreligious person. Moreover, those engaged in making fine fashion for others are in a bad condition, since their work serves no purpose other than to kill time and waste eternity, the same as the ladies of the land who occupy their time weaving toilet cushions.

Inevitably, then, somewhere in the immediate vicinity of each individual form of the problem (as it relates to the various kinds of superfluities of civilization), Thoreau presents the solution in its appropriate natural form:

> Perhaps we should never procure a new suit, however ragged and dirty the old, until we have so conducted, so enterprised or sailed in some way, that we feel like new men in the old . . . Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives. The loon retires to solitary ponds to spend it. Thus also the snake casts its slough, and the caterpillar its wormy coat, by an internal industry and expansion; for clothes are but our outmost cuticle and mortal coil. (26)

According to Thoreau, clothing should be a sign of a person's spiritual condition. If he has not ascended to a higher form of being, then his old and tattered clothing should be the visible advertisement of this fact. Conversely, a new suit of clothing should be the sign of a new person, whose mind is void of the old ways of thinking and clothed with true spiritual reality, whose body has quit the old way of living and adopted a better way, the new mode of living being the natural result of the spiritual reality that dresses his mind. Again, Thoreau describes his solution of spiritual growth by comparing it to growth in the natural world as it applies to the necessity of retaining the

body's vital heat. In the world of reality, he sees no difference between a man's clothing and a bird's feathers, a snake's slough, or a caterpillar's coat; they are necessary to keep life in the body and should be replaced when growth has reached a certain point, when the organism has adopted a new kind of life as a result of its inward change. In Nature, it is as it should be. The problem remains, however, that civilized man goes through numerous moulting seasons when there has been no actual improvement in his condition. Nevertheless, this does not change Thoreau's idea that it should be with man as it is with Nature when it comes to clothing or any of the other necessities of life.

The numerous repetitions of the argument in the rest of the chapter involving the other necessities of life need not be covered in this paper. It is enough to say that whichever of the necessities of life that he uses to present the argument with, he represents the problem with what is in the mainstream of human affairs and the solution with what is in the mainstream of natural affairs. The basic structural pattern of the argument repeats itself again and again, the tenor being the same, the form different. For Thoreau, there is only one thing to say, but an infinite

number of different ways to say it; just as there is only one spiritual goal in life but a million different ways to reach it, "as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one center" (12). Still, each of these ways must meet the criteria of Nature to be the right way.

Within the argument in the form of what is and what should be concerning shelter, Thoreau begins relating his own personal experience getting a suitable shelter for his experiment at Walden Pond. Of course the right way to get a shelter is to build it yourself because it is just as natural for a man to construct his house as it is for a bird to build its own nest. "I never in all my walks came across a man engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building his house." (51) Thus, Thoreau explains that he borrowed an axe in the Spring of 1845, went to the woods fronting Walden Pond and cut down the timber for the frame of his house (45-47). Later, having purchased the shanty of a migrant worker, he razed it, transported the salvaged lumber to his homestead sight and covered the frame that he had earlier pieced together (47-48). With the help of a few friends, he raised the walls and secured the roof (49). The meagre cost of this natural enterprise was $28.12\frac{1}{2}$ which was more than necessary but considerably less than the cost of a civilized man's

shelter, besides having all of the real advantages and none of the many disadvantages of the modern house (54).

> I thus found that the student who wishes for a shelter can obtain one for a lifetime at an expense not greater than the rent which he now pays annually. If I boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than myself; and my shortcomings do not affect the truth of my statement. (54-55)

The reason, then, that Thoreau includes the account of his own natural way of living, here and in other pages, is not to gloat about how much more pious and righteous he is than the damned people of civilization. Nor is it to satisfy the curiosity of a few friends as he states in the first paragraph of the chapter. No doubt he has many reasons: (1) he wants to contrast his own charming natural way of life against the sordid existence of civilized man; (2) he wants to show that what should be can be, that it is possible for the individual to live as Nature intended; (3) he wants to explain what constitutes a natural human life; (4) almost everything in his account has to do with the second part of his argument that the damned condition of civilization and its despair are unnecessary, that damnation of the body and soul is not fate unless the individual remains ignorant to the truth or willingly persists in living unnaturally.

The argument proper in "Economy" ends when Thoreau finishes explaining what is (the problem) and what should be (the solution) concerning the necessities of life and the account of his own natural way of securing the necessities of life. The primary premises on which it stands are 1) personal experience and 2) faith (78). Through his own experience living in civilization and observing his neighbors, he knows that the popular philosophy of life is unreal and causes the decay of man's higher physical and spiritual nature. Through his own experience living a natural life at Walden Pond, he knows that man's damned condition is unnecessary, that a natural life is possible and better than an unnatural life. Another support for these assumptions is the existence of the primitive peoples of the world whom he refers to as being "sojourners in Nature" (41) just as he was at Walden Pond. The heavier burden of his argument, however, is born by his faith in the goodness of Nature, faith in the idea that a natural life will inevitably lead the individual to physical and spiritual maturity.

III

Eight or ten pages remain in "Economy" which deal with the matter of philanthropy and seem to make up a section apart from the argument, but not totally unrelated to the argument. It seems as if Thoreau has anticipated a certain kind of criticism against his philosophy of extreme rugged individualism which contends that a good business with the Celestial Empire is all that a person need concern himself with in this life. Thus I feel that he includes this section as a counter argument to defend himself from the charge that his life serves no purpose outside of itself. This section is relevant to my purpose because it explains what Thoreau believes his solution will accomplish beyond individual salvation.

To begin with, Thoreau admits that, in the common sense of the term, he has done very little <u>good</u> for the poor people of the community; for when he has offered to maintain some poor unfortunate souls of the community on the same level as himself, they have always chosen to remain poor (80). Still, he maintains that others could receive something of infinite value from his existence if he were to exist in a natural state and grow into a divine being:

> At doing something,--I will not engage that my neighbors shall pronounce it good,--I do not hesitate to say that I should be a capital fellow to hire; but what that is, it is for my employer to find out. What good I do, in the common sense of that word, must be aside from my main path, and for the most part wholly unintended. Men say practically, Begin where you are and such as you are, without aiming mainly to become of more worth, and with kindness aforethought go about doing good. If I were to preach at all in this strain, I should say rather, Set about being good. As if the sun should stop when he had kindled his fires up to the splendor of a moon or a star of the sixth magnitude, and go about like a Robin Goodfellow, peeping in at every cottage window, inspiring lunatics, and tainting meats, and making darkness visible, instead of steadily increasing his genial heat and beneficence till he is of such brightness that no mortal can look him in the face, and then, and in the meanwhile too, going about the world in his own orbit, doing it good, or rather, as a truer philosophy has discovered, the world going about him getting good. (81-82)

By being good, in other words, by being a higher form of human being, Thoreau would be of more real value to others as a source of inspiration than if he were to do good for them in the form of giving a tenth of his income to charity or devoting his whole life to help them get what they don't need or what they can get for themselves. Thoreau compares his ideal self to the sun which goes around in its natural

orbit, gaining in brightness and beauty, while the planets go about it in their own natural orbits getting the benefit of the brightness and beauty that it unconsciously displays according to natural forces. Thoreau would be like the sun, a symbol of spirit, affecting the atmosphere of the day, reflecting the growing spirit within himself, unconsciously conducting his life according to the natural virtues of "sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence and the like" (181). By being a natural object like the sun and doing what Nature compelled him to do, Thoreau would be a source of divine inspiration from which others could get light (enlightenment). Thus, Thoreau does not consider his individualism to be a extreme form of selfishness because it will ultimately give others the real help they need.

Thoreau follows the defense of his solution with a counter assault of unprecedented scorn against the popular tradition of philanthropy:

> There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. It is human, it is divine carrion. If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life, as from that dry and parching wind of the African deserts called the simoom, which fills the mouth and nose and ears and eyes with dust till you

> are suffocated, for fear that I should get some of his good done to me,--some of its virus mingled with my blood. No--in this case I would rather suffer evil the natural way. . . . I never heard of a philanthopic meeting in which it was sincerely proposed to do any good to me, or the like of me. (82-83)

Thoreau equates philanthropy with a kind of African dust storm which clogs the senses and finally suffocates a person to death. Its goodness is really the same evil from which the mass of men are suffering. The luxury that most men spend their lives getting distracts the individual's attention from the real physical and spiritual purposes of life. In a sense, then, it suffocates the higher character of the body by keeping the senses clogged up with appearances so they cannot perceive reality, thereby suffocating the inner soul. From Thoreau's point of view, if he would devote his life to helping poor people obtain the things that would hinder the elevation of the body and soul, he would be doing them evil rather than good. Philanthropy is just another one of those numerous things which most men call good which Thoreau believes in his soul to be bad (11).

This counter argument does not involve merely a defense of the argument's solution but also includes an equally vigorous attack on the problem. Thus, we have

in this final section which seems to stand apart from the main argument, still yet another form of the two main parts of the same argument, with the same structural technique of juxtaposing the negative problem and the positive solution. This method creates contrast which makes both the problem and solution stand out in high relief, thus exagerating further what he has already exagerated to a high degree. In addition, we find that Thoreau's solution is not for the sake of the individual merely, but designed to alleviate the problem that plagues the bodies and souls of men everywhere. His solution does not call for the complete isolation of the individual from the civilized world, but rather a complete abstinence from its false way of thinking and living so that he can ascend to a higher form of being and thereby provide an example of improvement to inspire others. Thus Thoreau's individualism necessarily involves the spiritual welfare of others whether they realize it or not.

In the next to last paragraph, Thoreau compresses the whole argument in what I consider to be the most literal form of all the various forms in the chapter:

> Our manners have been corrupted by communication with the saints. Our hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring Him forever. One would say that even the

> prophets and redeemers had rather consoled the fears than confirmed the hopes of man. There is nowhere recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life, any memorable praise of God. All health and success does me good, however far off and withdrawn it may appear; all disease and failure helps to make me sad and does me evil, however much sympathy it may have with me or I with it. If, then, we would indeed restore mankind by truly Indian, botanic, magnetic, or natural means, let us first be as simple and well as Nature ourselves, dispel the clouds which hang over our brows, and take up a little life into our pores. Do not stay to be an overseer of the poor, but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world. (87)

The cause of the problem is ignorance. Through communication with the saints, the prophets and redeemers of antiquity man has a false conception of God and his own relation to God and His creation. From their instruction, man continues to conceive of God the way they did, an implacable diety demanding his time and energy for endless pursuits. By corrupting the mind of man with their false thinking, they have corrupted his body. For this life of despair and damnation, man curses God in his prayers but tries to endure his condition because he regards it as fate. The solution is spiritual enlightenment, to become aware of the infinite

wisdom and benevolence of God and the goodness and beauty of His creation. The restoration of mankind involves individual reform of the mind and body, the manifestation of spiritual truth in the virtuous conduct of the body's life. This success will inspire others to similar successes just as the failure and disease of antiquity has inspired the present generations of men to failure and disease. If the individual becomes "as simple and well as Nature," he will be "one of the worthies of the world" from which others will get good. Through his own salvation, then, he will contribute indirectly to the salvation of others.

In this same paragraph, Thoreau also says that no one has yet "recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life, any memorable praise of God" (87). Such a document would "confirm the hopes" of man rather than console his despair. This is the general concept that Thoreau has of his own story in the book, "an account of a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life" that he lived at Walden Pond, a "memorable praise of God" who gave him that gift. The very existence of his own successful account as a natural being in addition to the health of Nature itself in its many forms contrasted against the failure and disease of

civilization, in the pages of Walden, is designed to create a force (which I have chosen to call an argument) to move men in the direction of his particular kind of individual reform. Thus, the argument prevails throughout the book and the dominant method of presentation is the contrast between Nature and civilization. Still, "Economy" is the best chapter to see the argument taking shape because it deals with the cause and effect of the problem, deals more specifically with necessity, and clarifies the relationship between the account of Thoreau's life in Nature at Walden Pond and the solution.

IV

To complete this paper, it will suffice to consider the nature of Thoreau's solution in more detail and independent of the argument. We can safely assume at this point that what constitutes human improvement in Thoreau's mind is spiritual enlightenment in the mind which gives birth to a new body manifesting the divine virtues (previously mentioned). In other words, the kind of thought that occupies the mind ultimately determines the quality of a man's physical condition. If he contaminates his mind with the same old mode of thought that John Field did, then of course his life will correspond to that kind of false thinking. On the other hand, if his thought is characterized by spiritual reality, then his life in the

physical world will reflect that spiritual thought that occupies the mind. One thing is for certain in Thoreau's concept of improvement then: thought precedes and determines the quality of a man's physical condition; and presumably the ultimate condition of the soul after death.

The images of natural development that Thoreau uses in "Economy" suggest that he conceives of man's over-all physical and spiritual progress as a natural growing process from a primitive to a mature stage. He explains that man is similar to the seed in nature, that he is capable of getting his own necessities from the physical world and has the inherent potential to grow into a higher form of being (17). Moreover, he says that the ideal man is much the same as a fowl, caterpillar or snake whereas the outward change in appearance (in dress) is the sure sign of internal change. Another comparison relating human improvement to natural growth in "Economy" (which I have not yet referred to) is where Thoreau observes a snake lying torpid in the cold water:

> One day . . . I saw a striped snake run into the water, and he lay on the bottom, apparently without inconvenience, as long as I stayed there, or more than a quarter of an hour; perhaps because he had not yet fairly come out of the torpid state. It appeared to me that for a like reason men

> remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life. (45-46)

Spring of springs is an interesting play on words suggesting a likeness between God and the kind of spring on which things are suspended or the kind of spring that forces objects into motion (movement from a lower to a higher state being the primary characteristic of physical and spiritual reality). The other spring refers to the creation of the main-spring (God), the spring of water in which the snake lays in its torpid state and at the same time the dynamic season of the year (Spring) in which all natural things are changing to something better. Thus, if man would feel the influence of God arousing him, he would "of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life" (my italics). In other words, like the snake which feels the influence of the spirit in the warming water in which it lays, then comes out of that element, sloughs off its dead skin, and changes its mode of existence in response to its internal growth, the person who feels the influence of God in the warming element surrounding him will "of

necessity" grow into a higher form of being, get rid of the old thoughts, assimilate new thoughts into his mind, quit the old way of living and begin living a better life in response to the force of the new thought. This metaphor and the previous ones strongly suggest that Thoreau's concept of human improvement is organic in nature, which is to say that the growth of the soul and virtuous character in a man corresponds to physical growth. The general form that any developing organism assumes takes place of necessity and not by choice. The same would be true in a concept of organic spiritual growth: the individual would have no more control over the process of spiritual enlightenment in his mind and the form that this enlightenment assumes in his character and virtuous behavior than he would over the internal organs and functions of the body which combine to determine the general external form of the body.

To a great extent, the virtues of a physical being living "a higher and more ethereal life" would be natural, compulsory, and unconscious acts caused by the internal growth of the spirit. Thoreau is fairly clear about this concerning the aesthetic effects of a natural life:

> What reasonable man ever supposed that ornaments were something outward and in the skin merely,--that the tortise got his spotted shell, or the shell-fish its

> mother-o'-pearl tints, by such a contract as the inhabitants of Broadway their Trinity Church? But a man has no more to do with the style of architecture of his house than a tortise with that of its shell: nor need the soldier be so idle as to try to paint the precise color of his virtue on his standard. . . . What of architectural beauty I now see, I know has gradually grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder,—out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance; and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life. (51-52)

The virtues of a natural being's life, such as are involved in the beautiful simplicity of his shelter, are not acts that he consciously does to impress others with the fact of his piety. The beauty of the tortise's shelter, which is the effect of its natural virtue, results from the necessity of retaining its body's vital heat and the inherent simplicity of its nature. The real aesthetic qualities of a man's life are not different from the beauty of the tortise's shell: the rustic beauty of his simple shelter is the natural effect of his virtuous character and the need to preserve his body's life. Virtue and its aesthetic effects thus happen as natural responses to the force of inner spiritual growth. This supports the idea that the improvement Thoreau refers to in Walden is organic in nature.

The organic nature of spiritual growth in Thoreau's concept suggests that the spiritual reality or thought, which molds the body into its distinct character, exists in the mind in a primitive form and grows into a mature form just as the internal organs of the body are inherent and grow into maturity. In "Solitude," he makes it clear that thought does have the same organic characteristic as living matter:

> Some of my pleasentest hours were during the long rain-storms in the spring or fall, which confined me to the house for the afternoon as well as the forenoon, soothed by their ceaseless roar and pelting; when an early twilight ushered in a long evening in which many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves. (146-147)

This statement indicates that the thought process itself (spiritual enlightenment) corresponds to physical growth. The thought actually exists in an immature form in some part of the mind just as the seed lies in the fertile soil. Like the seed, it sends out its roots for nourishment from which it grows eventually to unfold itself to the understanding just as the plant unfolds its beauty to the sight. The analogy that Thoreau draws between human and vegetable life in "Economy" includes the growth of the mind as well as the body.

All that he says about the evils of appearances and the value of reality makes it obvious that he considers reality in the form of natural facts to be the building blocks of spiritual truth or thought. In "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," he says that he went to Walden Pond so that he could "front only the essential facts of life, and see if /he/ could not learn what it had to teach . . ." (101). Fronting the realities of Nature, Thoreau expected to gain a true understanding of God and His creation:

> God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. (107-108)
>
> If you stand right fronting face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces . . . and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. (109)

According to these statements, we can come to grips with spiritual reality, understand the sublime and noble nature of God and His creation, "only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us." Fronting the facts, we will understand that God is not cruel and

insane but benevolent and rational. Only from the facts can we come to understand "the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world" (99) and thus not be afraid of our mortal condition. In other terms, then, the perception of reality is the crude substance of Thoreau's faith in the idea that God is a rational and benevolent diety that created the physical world for some divine purpose. This faith is the essence of his soul which grows stronger as his mind becomes more enlightened with the truth, as each spiritual thought feeds on the incoming sense perceptions of reality and gradually unfolds itself to his understanding.

That Thoreau thought of the reality of Nature as a kind of food to nourish the growing truth in the mind is apparent from some of the language he uses to suggest its spiritual significance. Concerning the Hollowell farm which he wanted to buy but couldn't, he says:

> But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow. (91-92)
>
> I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm . . . milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream . . . (92)
>
> To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on . . . for I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted, if I could only afford to let it alone. (92-93)

In this same chapter, he refers to the landscape, the animal and plantlife, the pond, and all the reality that surrounded his house at Walden Pond as "pasture enough for my imagination" (97). The words cream, crop, and pasture which describe Thoreau's harvest from Nature all denote some kind of sustenance or source of energy that nourishes the growth of physical organisms. But the fact that he carried off its yield without a wheelvarrow implies that it was an intangible food that Thoreau got from Nature, which supports the idea that Thoreau likened the sense perceptions of reality to a kind of nourishment for the growth of spiritual truths in the mind.

In Thoreau's organic concept of spiritual enlightenment, the senses which serve to introduce perceptions of reality to the mind would naturally correspond to the mouth which introduces food into the stomach. The remaining problem, then is to determine what faculty of the mind in Thoreau's concept corresponds to the stomach. As the stomach serves to break down crude energy into usable energy for the growth and motion of the body, a similar catalyzing faculty must exist in the mind to change mere sense perceptions of natural facts into spiritual truths for the growth and the upward movement of the soul.

Most thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and even the twentieth) would assign this function to the intellect or reason. John Locke, for example, in Essays on the Law of Nature, argues that the mind of man can arrive at spiritual truths through 1) sense perception and 2) the proper use of reason. In his theory, sense perception introduces the pure fact into the mind. The fact serves as a foundation upon which the mind builds other truths through the process of reasoning from fact to inferences. He actually demonstrates this reasoning process and does arrive at a general conclusion about the nature of God and His creation, which he calls truth.[4] This theory and others which celebrate the reason as man's highest faculty imply an active and conscious mind in coming to grips with spiritual reality. For Locke and his followers, then, the intellect or reason would be the catalyst of the mind that changes fact into thought.

Thoreau also believes that the active reason in the conscious mind has a function in the over-all scheme of spiritual growth; but its capacity is limited to distinguishing reality from appearances. In "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," he describes reality in the civilized world like a vein of precious ore beneath the ground

[4]John Locke, Essays on the Law of Nature, ed. W. von Leydon (London, 1954), 147-159.

and therefore not easily accessible to the senses. In order that the senses can come into contact with reality and introduce it to the mind, it must be mined and separated from that which has no value (appearances). This is the function of the intellect (reason), which he likens to a "cleaver" or an "organ for burrowing," capable of sorting out what is real in the realm of human necessity from "the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearances, that alluvion which covers the globe . . ." (108-109). Using his reason during the experiment at Walden Pond, then, he was able to determine where necessity ends and luxury begins. He was able to consciously calculate what is natural and real for the human being. In general, using his reason, he taught himself how to live like a natural being in harmony with all of Nature.

In "Ponds in Winter," Thoreau definitely states that reason is not involved in the actual process of changing facts into spiritual truths:

> If we knew all the laws of Nature, we should need only one fact, or the description of one actual phenomenon, to infer all the particular results at that point. Now we know only a few laws, and our result is vitiated not, of course, by any confusion or irregularity in Nature, but by our ignorance of essential

> elements in the calculation. Our notions of law and harmony are commonly confined to those instances which we detect; but the harmony which results from a far greater number of seemingly conflicting, but really concurring, laws, which we have not detected, is still more wonderful. The particular laws are as our points of view, as, to the traveller, a mountain outline varies with every step, and it has an infinite number of profiles, though absolutely but one form. Even when cleft or bored through it is not comprehended in its entireness. (320)

He does admit here that it would be possible to arrive at absolute truths through reason if we knew all the laws of Nature which constantly operate to maintain harmony in the Universe. But since we know but a few of Nature's infinite number of laws, our calculated conclusions based on these few laws are always distortions of the absolute truth about the creator and the creation. In short, Thoreau believes that a rational and benevolent supernatural power created the Universe which is characterized by harmony among all the natural parts. This is the spiritual enlightenment that Thoreau has received from sense perceptions of natural facts; but it is not the product of reasoning from fact to inference since reason does not have access to all the laws of Nature and therefore cannot possibly change facts into ultimate spiritual truths. The intellect can only determine what is real from what is unreal in the physical

world, what is necessary, natural, and therefore good and what is unnecessary, unnatural, and therefore evil. Even for these simple truths, the reason depends upon faith in the premise that what is natural is good and what is unnatural is evil. Of course, this faith has grown stronger in Thoreau's mind because of the true spiritual enlightenment inspired by sense perceptions of the natural world, but probably had its origin in the spiritual instinct (232) or "genius" which continually urges him to live a simple life like Nature, free from the complexities and disease of civilization (230).

The several places in Walden where Thoreau actually describes the enlightenment he received from the natural world also suggest that some faculty of the mind other than reason is involved in changing facts to truths. Probably the best example is in "Solitude:"

> In the midst of a gentle rain . . . I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and benificent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me . . . I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary . . . (146)

Three things in this statement confirm the notion that reason was not active in resolving this spiritual insight that revealed his own harmony and kinship with every element in the natural world: (1) the suddenness of the realization; (2) the fact that it was unaccountable, meaning that reason did not explain it to the understanding; (3) and the fact that he did not consciously make himself aware of it but was "made aware" of it. This seems like some form of revelation of truth from a source outside of the mind. But his organic concept of the thought process is different from revelation since the thought exists in the mind like a seed in the soil to "take root and unfold" itself to the understanding as a result of incoming sense perceptions of reality. The incoming sense perception is not a revelation but only crude energy to be broken down into usable energy for the growth of the thought already existing in the mind in a premature stage. The fact that spiritual truth is organic in nature makes it something quite different from the revelation of other religious concepts of spiritual enlightenment.

If spiritual enlightenment is not revelation from an external source or the result of reasoning from fact to inference, then the imagination must be the faculty that

serves to digest sense perceptions into the proper form of nutrient for the growing thought to assimilate. In "Higher Laws," he says that the taste of animal meat is a disagreeable sense perception to his "imagination" (237), thus suggesting that the imagination has the same potential as the stomach to become upset over and even to reject improper foods. Then, too, in "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," he describes the natural facts surrounding his dwelling at Walden Pond as "pasture enough for /his/ imagination" (97). Thus the facts that his senses grazed on were transformed into food for thought in the poetic faculty, the imagination. From this, it is logical to assume that the seedling thoughts that gradually unfolded the truth about his kinship with the natural world in "Solitude" had their roots in the fertile imagination. Moreover, it is logical that this fertile substance in the poetic faculty exists in the form of metaphors which suggest the likeness between natural facts and spiritual facts and serve as objects of contemplation to give rise to literal spiritual truths on the understanding. To speculate even further, I will venture to say that the actual catalyzing agent within the imagination, which corresponds to the enzymes in the digestive system, is

that mystical agency, closely aligned with the imagination, which Emerson calls Reason (not the same as Locke's reason) which makes sense perceptions of Nature fluid and transparent and expressive of spirit.[5]

To recapitulate briefly again, the growth of thought which is synonymous with spiritual enlightenment is a process organic in nature that goes on in the mind without any conscious reasoning activity (except for determining reality from appearances). Thoreau is faithful to this concept of enlightenment throughout the book. Whenever he deals with his own spiritual insight, he describes the manner in which he got it in the passive voice so as to stress the fact that it was something that happened to him and not something that he consciously calculated for the benefit of his understanding. This is to say, he was "made aware" of the truth which confirmed his faith in the goodness of God and Nature and did not rationally make himself aware of it. The best example is in "Solitude" where he says "many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves" which I have already referred to (146-147). For another example, in "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," he says that he "was . . . affected" by the perception of a mosquito making its way across his room in the early morning

[5]The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York, 1950) 27-29.

hours. The ultimate effect of this affection was his personal realization "of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world" (98-99). Again, Thoreau's faculty of reason was passive in the process of this spiritual enlightenment concerning the eternal growth of the physical world. He did not reason from the fact of the mosquito's vigor and fertility to infer the truth about the "everlasting vigor and fertility of the world;" but his mind "was . . . affected" by the perception of the mosquito. In the imagination, Reason changed the fact into a metaphor, likening the mosquito's hum to "any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing of its own wrath and wanderings" (98-99). The thought, sending forth its roots and drawing up this metaphorical substance, unfolded itself to the understanding and revealed the truth about the "everlasting vigor and fertility of the world." Notice that since the literal truth unfolds itself to the understanding in Thoreau's concept, the intellect or reason is not even active in the interpretation of the metaphorical truth in the imagination.

Even when Thoreau appears to be reasoning from fact to inference to arrive at ultimate truth, he makes it evident that he is merely discerning the truth that is

growing and unfolding itself in his mind. In "Spring," he recognizes the similarity between the figures made by the thawing sand on one side of the railroad embankment and the leafy foliage on the opposite side (336). From this similarity, he proceeds to further conclusions about the similarity between all natural phenomena and "the vegetable leaf" (338-340). From this he concludes:

> It convinces me that Earth is still in her swaddling-clothes, and stretching forth baby fingers on every side. . . . There is nothing inorganic. These foliaceous heaps lie along the bank like the slag of a furnace, showing that Nature is "in full blast" within. The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum on stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,— not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic. (340-341)

From the perception of two facts involving organic and inorganic Nature, Thoreau reaches one similarity after another until he arrives at the ultimate truth that the earth is living poetry and all of its natural parts are organic, growing in harmony towards a single divine purpose. It does appear that he is making himself aware of this truth with reason, especially when he is laboring to point out the similarities between all things and the vegetable leaf.

In the beginning, however, when he makes his initial sense perceptions of the two facts, he frankly admits that he is experiencing some kind of mystical trance in which he is again affected:

> When I see on the one side the inert bank,--for the sun acts on one side first,--and on the other this luxuriant foliage, the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me,--had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about. I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body. (337-338; my italics)

From the sense perception of the inorganic formations of the sand and the organic foliage, Thoreau's imagination is affected. The process of this affection is Reason changing sense perception into metaphorical truth which likens all natural things to the vegetable leaf just as it likened the mosquito's journey across his house to some noble and courageous odyssey of ancient mythology. In this metaphorical truth conceived on the imagination, the seed-like thoughts take root and gradually unfold the ultimate truth that all natural phenomena is growing in harmony in response to a central force. From the vision of this truth

Thoreau's faith in the rational goodness and benevolence of God and Nature is strengthened and thus his body and soul grow "of necessity" towards "a higher and more ethereal life."

V

By his own admission in Walden, we know that Thoreau did not achieve in the course of his life the ultimate growth of his own body and soul which he presents as the feasible solution to the problem of spiritual damnation that prevails in civilization. In "Beanfield," he expresses some serious alarm over his own failure to grow into a higher state of being:

> I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil and manurance, and sustain me, for surely it has not been exhausted for these crops. Alas! I said this to myself; but now another summer is gone, and another, and another, and I am obliged to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they were the seeds of those virtues, were wormeaten or had lost their vitality, and so did not come up. (181)

Thoreau seems to have made a terrible realization here that he too, after the two years at Walden, is among the damned

masses of civilization. He says that his seeds of virtue that he planted at Walden Pond did not come up because they "were wormeaten or had lost their vitality," presumably while under the many years of corrupting influences of civilization before he began cultivating them in earnest. In his concept of spiritual growth, which is organic in nature, Thoreau makes it clear that the higher nature of man is subject to decay like "the bloom on fruits" if it is not handled and preserved carefully (7). Moreover, he says that the bad condition of many is "a well-nigh incurable form of disease" (12). Thus, in Thoreau's concept where spiritual growth corresponds to physical growth once the seeds have been damaged to a certain extent, they cannot be fully restored. Perhaps, then, in "The Beanfield" and other places in Walden where Thoreau makes references to his own failure, he wants to give the impression that his own higher nature was already too much infected with the contagion of civilization before he made an honest and sincere effort to improve it at Walden Pond, that his two years with Nature was only therapy, sufficient to temporarily arrest the disease long enough for him to see and experience the true goodness of life, yet too late to affect a permanent cure because his antagonist had previously ensnared him too

completely for any kind of lasting escape. It is true that after his two years at Walden Pond, Thoreau indulged in the same sordid business world which he condemns in the pages of Walden. He borrowed money to have his first book published (A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers) and went to work in his father's pencil business to make reparations after the book became a financial failure.[6] Yet even though he returned to civilization, his journals indicate that he spent much of his time in his former position as "inspector of snowstorms and rainstorms" and every other natural phenomenon that came under his scrutiny. Whether or not he really considered himself among the damned is beyond the main point of this conclusion. But if he assumes the persona of a tragic-figure in Walden, like King Lear or even Oedipus who both see the light too late, then this would have some effect on the argument in the book itself. Many critics would argue that his own ultimate failure would destroy his argument that man can ascend to a higher state of being as an alternative to his present damned condition in civilization. In truth, however, if we see Thoreau in Walden as helplessly slipping back into the quicksands of civilization, either because he does not have the courage of his convictions or because he is suffering a mortal

[6] Krutch, page 99.

relapse of the sickness of civilization--if he hears that drummer drumming but cannot follow because his higher nature has lost its vigor—the truth of his argument would not be affected in any negative way. Thoreau as a tragic figure who cannot enjoy the fruits of his own truth would further enhance the sense of urgency for immediate cultivation of the seeds that prevails from the very beginning. Thoreau's tragedy would impress the reader's mind with the idea that Time is of the essence in the process of spiritual growth just as it is in physical growth, that the soul must be replenished with sustenance day after day just as the body needs daily nourishment to retain its life, that his faith in the goodness and benevolence of God and His creation must be affirmed perpetually or it will weaken and die along with the soul.

In general, Thoreau's ultimate failure after Walden Pond, which he refers to several times in the book itself, does not discredit his success at Walden Pond. The account of this success presented in Walden stands apart from any inconsistencies beyond his two year adventure with Nature, and supports his argument that the individual need not and should not suffer in this world as a vain expression of fidelity to a cruel and insane god, that the real God has provided him with

an inherent potential to reach a heavenly state of being in Nature's environment on earth, that the rewards of virtue are here and now in a natural life, and that he need not despair over his mortal condition. Thoreau's "simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life" at Walden Pond contrasted against the despair and disease of civilization forces the reader to wonder why he himself continues to sweat and strain under civilization's heavy load when an alternative life of spiritual improvement and incomparable pleasure awaits him in the world of Nature.

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